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ABSTRACT

The closing of a school is a difficult step for everyone involved. In this review, 11 entries in the ERIC system about school closing are summarized. Included are suggestions for administrators to involve the community in the decision-making, and alternative uses of school buildings. Case studies are included that highlight how school districts have handled the school closing problem. (MLF)

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School Closing

1 **Brody, Judith A.** "How to Close a School and Not Tear Your Community Apart in the Process," and **Beck, Wesley W., Jr.** "Everybody Got into the Act When Blackwell Closed a School." *American School Board Journal*, 163, 6 (June 1976), pp. 31-35, 46. EJ 139 363 and EJ 139 364.

Closing a school is necessarily an emotional and traumatic event for a community, Brody states, but it need not tear the community apart. Paths to successful closings lie in changing community attitudes toward enrollment decline, long-range planning, and community involvement.

Community members often resist school closings because they equate them with community decline. It is thus important for administrators and the board to help citizens see the benefits that come with declining enrollment. Fewer students and extra space can provide opportunities for achieving racial integration, lowering class size, and creating new community education centers and more early childhood and adult education centers.

The easiest way of overcoming community resistance is involving the community as extensively as possible in planning and decision-making. Community task forces can study enrollment trends and facilities and recommend solutions to the board. Task forces should be broad-based and include community members opposed to a closing.

Long-range planning for declining enrollment begins with collecting data—past, current, and projected—on population, birthrates, budgets, staff, and facilities. State departments of education might be able to help districts with this difficult task. After gathering and analyzing the data, districts will need to develop policies for staff reduction, surplus space utilization, and a host of related problems.

Brody supports her suggestions with several examples of district action. Beck adds an extended illustration of a successful community-guided school closure. Faced with rising costs and an enrollment drop of 15 percent, the Blackwell, Oklahoma, schools reorganized and converted one of four underused elementary schools into a districtwide kindergarten and special education center. The conversion brought curricular enrichment as well as a $154,000 reduction in expenses. The work of a school-community task force proved crucial to the district's two-year reorganization effort.

2 **Educational Facilities Laboratories.** *Surplus School Space: Options and Opportunities. A Report.* New York: 1976. 75 pages. ED 126 614.

Since enrollments first started their decline, districts have found a wide range of new uses for surplus school space. This report discusses the many factors that can influence reuse planning, such as population trends, state law, zoning ordinances, and the needs of private schools, and provides numerous examples of how districts and communities have put surplus classrooms and schools to use. It addresses concerned community members who might participate in reuse planning rather than professional educators.

The first consideration for surplus space should normally go to eliminating undesirable buildings and to housing educational programs and services, such as music, art, science, and vocational education, inadequately served during the period of growth.

Vacant school buildings can often serve a variety of public programs as human resources centers. Such use is especially desirable when a community has fewer school-aged children, but more young adults and senior citizens. The new programs can contribute to a sense of community resurgence and growth and help hold in town people who might otherwise choose to leave.

Sometimes government agencies, such as a parks and recreation department or a community college, can take over a surplus school. Another promising alternative for a district is the creation of a nonprofit agency to take over the school buildings and manage programs. Other options include filling surplus space with preschool and adult education programs, leasing space to private and other public schools, and selling a building for conversion into housing or industrial use. This last option has the advantage that the property will rejoin the tax rolls.

3 **Eisenberger, Katherine E.** "Enrollment Decline: The Task Force." Paper presented at the American Association of School Administrators annual meeting, Atlantic City, New Jersey, February 1976. 17 pages. ED 125 129.

One of the most important issues facing administrators in this time of enrollment decline, decreasing public confidence, and increasing demand for community control is how to provide for

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effective public involvement in school planning. Eisenberger analyzes the school closing task force, the most widely used form of community involvement in planning for decline. Her discussion supplements that of *Declining Enrollment: What to Do* (see below).

A few key factors, Eisenberger writes, determine the success or failure of the school closing task force. First is the length of time and type of task force. Districts just beginning to confront the reality of school closings should use extended study committees, which meet once or twice a month for nine months to a year. Second is the composition and leadership of the task force. Districts should seek the most comprehensive membership possible. The matter of leadership admits of more choice: an outside consultant or central office administrator may serve as a leader, the board may appoint one, or the task force may elect its own. Third is the means of selecting members. Members may volunteer, the board may appoint them, or community organizations may send representatives. Fourth is the charge of the task force, which may be general or specific.

The most crucial factor is organizational structure. Eisenberger illustrates some structuring possibilities with a case study of one successful task force. At the first meeting, the leader should turn the discussion away from charged debate over school closure to such practical matters as establishing a calendar of meeting dates, deciding what meeting format to follow, and identifying resource people who can provide specific and technical data. When a task force has to decide which schools to close, it will need an objective method. Eisenberger describes in detail the use of the KEMEC model, which identifies and ranks eight school closing criteria similar to those given in *Declining Enrollment: What to Do*.

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4 **Eisenberger, Katherine E.,** and **Keough, William F.** *Declining Enrollment: What to Do. A Guide for School Administrators to Meet the Challenge of Declining Enrollment and School Closings. AASA Executive Handbook Series, Volume 2.* Arlington, Virginia: American Association of School Administrators, 1974. 67 pages. ED 111 094.

This report remains the major sourcebook on school closing. Although it suffers from a disorderly presentation, it offers a sound planning framework ... much helpful advice.

School closings, the authors stress, are not routine and merely economic problems. Their true issue is the people involved, and they demand the utmost skill, care, and effort in interpersonal relations. Parents, children, teachers, and principals must all confront loss and the difficult task of establishing themselves in new surroundings. Some remedies for the personal problems and tensions of a closing are community, staff, and student polls, student visits to their future schools, teacher visitations and exchanges, and simulation exercises for board members and administrators. Most important is the use of a task force of community members.

Careful cost-benefit analysis and building-by-building comparative studies must precede any selection of schools for closing. Administrators should know the operating efficiency of buildings for the next five to ten years. Their financial knowledge should cover capital outlay, heating, electrical adequacy, maintenance, insurance, and alternative facility use.

The selection of schools for closing, however, must account for more than financial data. Eisenberger and Keough suggest that districts apply several other criteria in their deliberations. These are a school's condition and flexibility, potential use, academic excellence, capacity and present enrollment, and location. This last criterion should include considerations of the distance students have to travel to new schools, new transportation costs, and the maintenance of a similar socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic mix.

This rich study also includes a detailed school closing timeline, which marks out specific activities three years in advance of an actual closing, a school closing checklist, and an enrollment forecasting method for ready use.

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5 **Eugene Public Schools.** *Small Schools Task Force. Final Report.* Eugene, Oregon: 1976. 83 pages. ED 117 804.

A task force studying the possible closure of nine small elementary schools in this Oregon district of thirty-one elementary schools concludes that the smaller schools, even when operating below three-quarters capacity, offer benefits that more than outweigh their extra costs. At current population growth rates, area enrollment should return to normal within the next decade, though attendance boundaries may require some change.

A strictly financial approach to closure fails to consider the value of a school for its neighborhood, the effects of closure on property values, and possible community resentment and reaction. The financial benefits of closing a school should also prove minimal at best. The per-pupil expenses of the smaller schools are only three-fifths of a percent higher than those of the larger schools, and the net savings of one school closure would represent only about one-third of a percent of the total cost of the elementary school system. The opportunities for student participation and the creative use of extra space for both educational and community programs make the maintenance of schools worthwhile.

This report offers an excellent example of how a local school-community task force can study the demographic, economic, social, and philosophical issues of school closure and develop a practical and clearly stated policy that fits the unique needs of the area.

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6 **Hosler, Galen,** and **Weldy, Gilbert R.** "A Case Study: How One District Is Closing a High School." *NASSP Bulletin,* 61, 407 (March 1977), pp. 35-46. EJ 160 402.

Hosler and Weldy report the experience of the Niles Township high school district in closing a school. The authors are principals of schools affected by the closing.

After a year of study and public involvement, the Niles board decided in the spring of 1975 to close one of its three schools and transfer its students to the other two. The decision raised a host of unforeseen questions, and the district began its planning in earnest. The board issued a comprehensive position statement and a general closing plan, initiated further community dialogue, and appointed two advisory committees of staff, students, and community members. One committee considered the tasks of moving people and goods; the other the future use of the building.

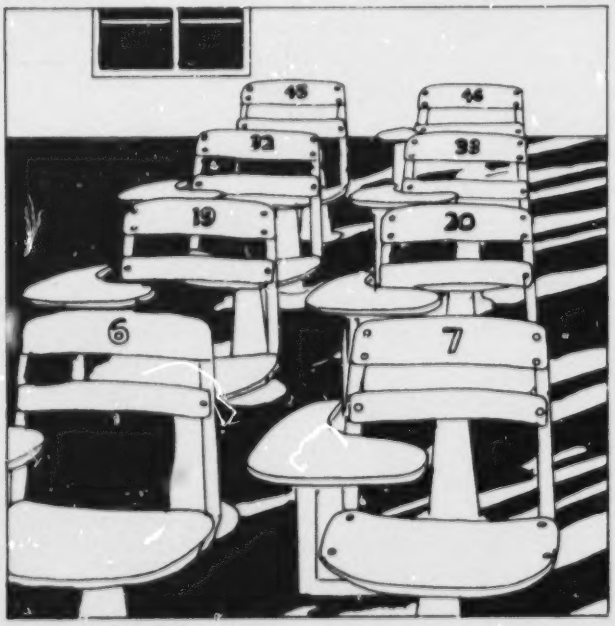
Following a study of closing alternatives, the first committee recommended that a full school program be maintained right up to closing. The board accepted this proposal in June 1976 and then set the committee to work developing detailed plans for the closing, set for June 1980. The committee divided its tasks among numerous subcommittees for the articulation of certified staff, classified staff, school curricula and services, and cocurricular activities and the disposal of the library collection and school equipment. Planning for the disposal of equipment required nine groups.

The uprooting of students, staff, and community brought by a closing, the authors conclude, demands thorough planning. The district's early start and careful, judicious planning, they believe, will make the final transition smooth and routine.

7 **Leggett, Stanton.** "Sixteen Questions to Ask—and Answer—Before You Close a Small School." *American School Board Journal,* 165, 4 (April 1978), pp. 38-39. EJ 175 691.

For years, districts have followed "the relentless demands of economic prudence" and continued to close small schools over parental and neighborhood protest. But now, Leggett writes, districts are taking a second look at alternative means of keeping small schools alive.

The base issue, Leggett states, is this: Can small schools find ways to cut their per-pupil costs to keep them in line with those of larger schools? His answer is "maybe." He goes on to list cautions and means for cutting costs that districts should consider before closing a school.



First of all, districts should not "jump to conclusions about enrollment projections." They may find that their presently empty space will be needed again in ten or fifteen years, and its maintenance costs may be less than the cost of a new school. Districts should also carefully examine overhead to make sure that per-pupil costs are accurately evaluated. Many district budgets have built-in prejudices against small schools, since they divide special costs equally among schools.

Administrators have numerous possibilities for cutting small school costs. They can establish multigraded classes; revise staffing policies; use the principal, secretary, and librarian for instruction; have faculty manage a school; use technology for instruction; change from school to central food preparation; make constructive use of empty classrooms; eliminate the librarian and arrange services with the public library; organize the district's custodial workers as a systemwide team; and find new ways to provide services such as art, music, and physical education.

Leggett concludes by advising districts to operate their schools on a program budget. When each school has an individual program budget, the district can bring in the public and ask for ways to keep the costs down. And if it becomes necessary to reduce services or close a school, the decision will meet with greater public understanding and acceptance.

8 **Peckenpaugh, Donald.** "Closing a School? What the Principal Must Consider." *NASSP Bulletin,* 61, 407 (March 1977), pp. 20-30. EJ 160 400.

Peckenpaugh lists and discusses nineteen tasks required of the principal during a school closing. His work is based on the procedures used by the Birmingham, Michigan, schools to close a junior high school.

After the decision to close has been made, a principal's first task is to review his or her assignment to clarify all expectations and responsibilities. The principal will also need at the start to update the district's enrollment study, review possible attendance boundaries for the receiving schools, and establish an advisory committee for community participation in the closing process.

As the closing proceeds, the principal will need to oversee the following tasks: reassignment of staff and students; a public information campaign; orientation programs for students, parents, and staff; new transportation arrangements; coordination of school curricula and cocurricular activities; students' constructive expression of their feelings; disposal of business and student records; division of school equipment; and moving of equipment. Only after all these concerns are met comes the actual closing of the school.

Peckenpaugh fills out his list with advice. He gives the following suggestions, for instance, to help principals divide up a school's equipment, furniture, supplies, and materials. Principals should assign someone to coordinate this task, start with an accurate updated inventory, and work up a defensible rationale for the division. One possible rationale calls for sending equipment first to the receiving schools according to their needs and the number of new students they gain and then to all other schools according to their needs. Principals will also need to pay special attention to school trophies and to class gifts and items purchased by parent groups. For the latter two, principals should seek out the advice of the donors. And last, principals should remember that staff time will be necessary for setting up the equipment in the receiving schools.

9 **Rideout, E. Brock,** and others. *Meeting Problems of Declining Enrolment: Educational, Social, and Financial Implications to School Boards of Declining Enrolments.* Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education, 1975. 104 pages. ED 140 396.

Nine detailed and provocative case studies recount a variety of district responses to underused school space. Some districts have

found ways to maintain small schools and satisfy their communities, some have successfully closed schools with a minimum of pain, and others have followed clumsy unilateral planning into community battles and court. The case studies underscore the need for keeping the community well informed, involving the community in finding solutions, and starting with an acceptable plan for school use after closure.

The authors follow their case studies with school closing guidelines. Ongoing research and planning is the first and most crucial step in meeting the problems of shrinking schools. Comprehensive long-term master plans have proved particularly helpful for many boards. Such plans should contain data, updated annually, on enrollment, costs, staffing, facilities and program adequacy. Boards will also want to consider the needs of other area districts for a possible combined approach to enrollment problems.

Boards should also develop a general policy for declining enrollments well before any need for action. Community members can then have the opportunity to express their concerns before they have a personal involvement in the closing of their own neighborhood school. A general policy should include criteria covering minimum school size and utilization, advisory committee use, and appeals of board decisions.

Also necessary are procedures for a school review and a school closure. When a school's enrollment drops, a review should produce alternative responses, which may include establishing multigrade classes, pairing schools to save administrative costs, adjusting attendance boundaries, and leasing vacant classroom space, in addition to closing. The authors list and discuss the essential actions and concerns for both school reviews and school closings.

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10 **Sargent, Cyril G.,** and **Handy, Judith.** *Fewer Pupils/Surplus Space. A Report.* New York: Educational Facilities Laboratories, 1974. 55 pages. ED 093 046.

Schools have several options for facility use during decline, Sargent and Handy report. Newly empty space can at first offer a welcome opportunity for curricular enrichment. As the problems become more serious, districts can use buildings for new educational uses (such as alternative schools), open them up to government and community agencies, and lease and sell them for commercial use. A set of priorities established in advance for the use of surplus space will help clarify district options and ease the closing process.

All districts, no matter what their unique needs, require a plan for school shrinkage, the authors emphasize. A plan for shrinkage must have (1) goals and objectives; (2) a factual base, which should include enrollment projections, data on school location, capacity, and general adequacy, and data on community changes; (3) an analysis of the data; (4) a set of possible solutions; and (5) a choice among alternatives. This latter should include a justification for the choice, a time sequence for its completion, and a cost analysis of all the plans. The authors advise districts to develop both a comprehensive master plan—covering policy, program, personnel, organization, and physical plants—and a closure plan.

The process of closing a school is a political act. Two essential rules should guide it. Administrators should "allow plenty of lead time" and "involve the community in planning for closings and selecting the choices to be made." Some educators have recommended a two-stage process. Districts should first present their data as a whole for community discussion and acceptance, and only then should administrators talk about the specifics of closing individual schools.

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11 **Sieradski, Karen.** *Implications of Declining Enrollments for Schools. School Leadership Digest Series, Number 17. ERIC/CEM Research Analysis Series, Number 19.* Arlington, Virginia; and Eugene: National Association of Elementary School Principals; and ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, University of Oregon, 1975. 32 pages. ED 114 906.

Declining enrollments mean adversity, Sieradski notes, but this adversity offers challenge and opportunity. Districts can make programs better as they condense them, and the process of closing schools can bring closer school-community relations. There are four major imperatives for administrators in this period of decline. Accurate enrollment forecasting and planning long in advance of necessary school closings or reorganization are first duties. Educators also need to communicate with all those affected—teachers, students, parents, and community members—if they hope for any success.

Some of the ways of easing the pain of school closings are coffee hours for parents, interschool visitations for staff and students, and the use of task forces. A task force of staff, students, parents, and community members should fulfill the following duties. It should (1) review the district's enrollment forecasting methods and data; (2) visit and rate each school according to its adequacy; (3) establish criteria for deciding which schools to close, (4) recommend schools to be closed and the order of closure, and (5) recommend future use of the closed schools.

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